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TWO SOUTHERN BOTANISTS AND THE CIVIL WAR

By NEIL E. STEVENS

BUREAU OF PLANT INDUSTRY

A SCIENTIST'S observations often can be best evaluated in the light of a knowledge of the man and the conditions under which he worked. The following notes regarding two eminent American mycologists will then be of interest to botanists; and, in view of the similarities between the times in which they lived and the present, may be of more general interest as showing something of the effect of the Civil War and reconstruction period on the science and the scientists of the south.

The source of the manuscript letters on which the present notes are based is the correspondence of the late Professor Edward Tuckerman, Jr., of Amherst, Mass., fortunately preserved almost complete and now the property of Professor Tuckerman's nephew, Judge E. T. Esty, of Worcester, Mass., who has courteously loaned them to the writer for examination and to whom the writer is much indebted. The correspondence, consisting of over eight hundred letters, dating from 1838 to 1873, is bound in nine quarto volumes and contains letters from practically all the American and many European botanists of that time.

The subjects of this sketch, the Rev. M. A. Curtis and H. W. Ravenel, were both distinguished for their contributions to botany, especially in the field of mycology. They were constant friends and co-laborers and apparently had a voluminous correspondence. At present only their letters to Tuckerman are available. Curtis was a native of Massachusetts, born in Stockbridge and graduated from Williams College. He went to Wilmington, North Carolina, at the age of twenty-two as tutor in the family of Governor Dudley. From this time almost continuously until his death he made his home in the Carolinas. As to his sympathies during the Civil War his correspondence gives not the slightest hint.

Ravenel, on the other hand, was of an old southern family, as he writes Tuckerman in a letter dated "Plantation near Black Oak [S. C.], March 23, 1857."

I have a peculiar love for this section of country—my native place, (here on this very plantation and house, the old family homestead, where I am now writing) and the home of my friends—Here, for six or eight generations, since our Huguenot fathers fled from persecution at the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, have the ties of home attachment been growing and strengthening. . . . The graves of our ancestors are here on these old family seats, and these sacred spots, which had their origin from the rude state of the frontier settlements have been kept up and used with pious care. They constitute, together with the traditionary history of their occupants, an endearing bond with the living, and tend to keep alive a sentiment of filial love and veneration.

It was here on these very plantations which their descendents still continue to occupy, that our ancestors cultivated rice and indigo long anterior to the Revolutionary War. Then, as the scenes of skirmishes and hostile meetings between the contending parties, during "the times that tried men's souls," they have become classic ground to the historian. It was here that the "Swamp Fox" Genl. Marion recruited his brigade, when nearly the whole state was in the hands of the British and Tories—and in the wild fastnesses of the Santee swamp, formed a nucleus of hope to the desponding patriots.

It is not then surprising that it is from Ravenel, interested as he was in the history and traditions of his section that we hear the first suggestion of sectional difficulties. He closes a letter written, December 31, 1850, with the following paragraphs:

I have never entertained a doubt that a large portion of the intelligent and patriotic citizens of the North, whatever they may think of our domestic institutions, are disposed to be faithful to the compromises of the constitution and the rights of the States—Could the settlement of this distracting subject be left to them, I would have confidence in the issue—But I fear the decision of the question has passed beyond their power—Demagoguism and fanaticism have swept with demoniac fury over the land, and the voice of reason and patriotism is almost hushed.

The South has loved the Union for the common glories of the past, and for what might have been the common glorious destiny of the future—She has made, and would be willing to make great sacrifices for its preservation—But her honor and self-respect she cannot sacrifice. She has not so learned her lesson of liberty from the great fathers of the republic in the days of its purity—The future is dark and portentous—and I almost despair of the integrity of the Union, but it may be that he who has hitherto so signally blessed and prospered our country may overrule the wicked machination of its foes.

The differences in national opinion which led Ravenel to look upon the future as "dark and portentous" were of course those which arose from the question as to the basis on which California should be admitted to statehood. Difficulties which were temporarily settled by the legislation arising from Clay's historic "Omnibus Bill," a settlement which seems to have

been satisfactory to Ravenel at least, for during the next ten years we find no mention of such matters in his letters.

Letters frequently tell as much by what they omit as by what they include, and it is certainly not without significance that in the score of letters which passed from each of these southerners to their northern friend during the years from 1850 to 1860 there is no mention of political affairs. This is particularly true when it is remembered that this decade was marked by events which were perhaps the most portentous through which this country has passed. Within this time came the birth of the Republican party, with its anti-slavery platform, the disagreements over the enforcement of the fugitive slave law, John Brown's raid, and the bitter struggle for Kansas.

Apparently southern botanists were not interested in politics. Ravenel's last letter, written on October 29, 1859, deals, as had the previous ones, with specimens sent and collections made and with "the preparation of my fifth century of fungi," which he hopes to be able to issue "in the course of a few months." Curtis was even less distracted by events not botanical. Though he is disturbed by the failure of the federal government to give proper attention to mycological collections.¹

What a pity that Government does not employ Curators for the preservation and judicious distribution of its collections, instead of leaving them to be eaten by insects, or stolen by unprincipled visitors. There is a large mass of duplicates among the Fungi now in my hands. How are they ever to be distributed properly, without an officer employed for the purpose, and one who has some knowledge of such matters.

On July 16, 1860, he writes asking Tuckerman's help in preparing a complete list of plants for the state geological survey:

I am preparing, in connection with our Geological Survey, a list of the Plants of this State. I desire to make it as accurate and complete as possible, and that end will be far nearer attained, if I can have your assistance. I send you a list of all the Lichens I know of, belonging to this State, about one-half, I suppose of the actual number. I presume you can add a good many. . . .

My first Report (on the Woody Plants of N. Car.) in a small pamphlet, should be published about this time, and I have ordered a copy to you.

During September, 1860, on the eve of Lincoln's election, Curtis interviews the Governor of North Carolina on a subject far from political and writes his friend Tuckerman as follows:²

Yesterday I had an interview with our Governor, and told him that I

¹ Letter dated March 10, 1859.

² Letter dated September 12, 1860.

had rather wait till the end of the current year before making another Report. As he assented to my humor, I can give you an opportunity of adding anything that may come to your notice between this and next December. So, please to consider your Report as *open* till that date for any additions or corrections.

Even later educational and scientific problems seems to have filled his mind, for in October he made a trip to Tennessee, the purpose of which he outlines in a letter dated "Oct. 23d, 1860."

You appear to have inferred that I went westward for "explorations." So far from this, I had no time for them at all, and collected not a solitary specimen except what I now enclose, which I hastily gathered en passant. My journeys westward for the last three or four years (in Aug. 1859 to Tenn; in Feb. last, to N. Orleans, and now again to Tenn.) are in connection with "The University of the South," of which I have been a Trustee from the beginning. The corner stone was laid on the 10th with much ceremony, and in the presence of about 5000 persons.

The closing days of 1860 find our botanists deeply engrossed in their favorite pursuits, Ravenel busy with the preparation of another volume of his *Exsiccata* and in collecting "likenesses of American and European Botanists"; Curtis at work perfecting his list of plants for the State Geological Survey and urging upon the governor their proper publication; and both all the while sending from the heart of the Carolinas to their friend Tuckerman in abolition Massachusetts, specimens of lichens, personal photographs, notes on plants collected and exchanged, together with delightfully intimate friendly letters full of good wishes and encouragement, and congratulation on his published work.

Here follow five years of silence, broken so far as this correspondence is concerned by only a single southern letter,³ which is of interest as bringing out the condition of science in the south during the war.

Since the war I have very much fallen behind a respectable knowledge of scientific progress in your department. Scientific pursuits are pretty much suspended in the South now—Minerva, Apollo and the peaceful Deities are driven from our Camps and only Mars remains.

Southern opinions and Southern purposes you will learn from our Newspapers—they do no credit to your Courage or your Conduct. What the result will be, God only knows; but I fear that it will be only the destruction of the best Government in the world and the substitution of the Jiff Davis Dynasty in its stead. Mr. Lincoln's management is wretchedly stupid and inefficient and will end badly, I fear.

The letter just quoted was written March 15, 1863, more

³ This letter was written to Tuckerman by Thos. Peters, a lawyer and amateur botanist of Moulton, Alabama. He was a friend and correspondent of Curtis, Ravenel, and Tuckerman.

than three months before the battle of Gettysburg. It is probable that Peters's attitude reflects that of many observers, both north and south, as to the probable success of the Confederacy.

Grant and Lee met at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. On August 26, 1865, Ravenel wrote his friend Tuckerman what he characterizes as "the first note written beyond our lines."

The bloody drama is over—and the four years of carnage is completed! The curtain now rises upon a new scene. What has occurred during these years that we have been shut out from the outside world? Are my old friends with whom I used to converse so agreeably in former times, still in their accustomed place and occupation, or have changes occurred? These and other questions of like import, have made me feel anxious to hear once more from you and others of my former correspondence. Mail communication is now partially resumed, (at least sufficiently so to send a letter through Charleston) and I indite this my first note written beyond our lines to my friend Tuckerman.

Plurimum do Salutem. We are no longer enemies by law, and I send you my greetings.

I cannot know, nor do I ask what your opinions and predelictions have been during the continuance of this bloody struggle. It is over—and its records are made. It has pleased the great Umpire of nations in the order of his Providence, that the Southern Confederacy should not accomplish the object for which they sought. So be it. I accept the issue as from His hands—and am content.

This attitude on Ravenel's part should by no means be taken to indicate that he had not suffered from the war or that he was not a thorough partisan; farther on in the same letter he writes:

All my sympathies have been for our success. I believed the time had come when our country, overgrown in territory (as I supposed) and with discordant and conflicting interests, would best accomplish its destiny under two separate and independent governments. It has been otherwise ordered by the Great Ruler of nations. I submit without discontent, because I know that infinite wisdom cannot err. I accept the verdict rendered, and in good faith intend to do all that the duties and obligations of a good citizen may require.

.

I have lost all my property, and must henceforth seek some employment for the support of my family.

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The deplorable state of affairs can scarcely be appreciated. Accustomed as we have been in this new country to abundance of the necessities of life, we had come to think of destitution and famine as evils only belonging to the old world. The reality has been brought home to us—and many a family who lived in affluence, now scarcely knows from day to day, the means of living.

His poverty was real, for he plans to sell his farm, his books, even his herbarium, and asks Tuckerman to help find a pur-

chaser, but even more eloquently than his words do the poor quality of the paper and especially of the ink which he uses in these letters bespeak the poverty of the man and of his section. The war had evidently forced his favorite pursuit from his attention, and his concluding paragraph contains the remark,

I have done nothing during the war in Botany. Other matters were too absorbing.

War influenced Curtis's studies also, for his first letter to Tuckerman concluded with this paragraph:

During the late war I paid no attention to Botany, except to the edible Mushrooms, from which I have gotten many a substantial and luxurious meal. My experience in this way, and that of several families about me to whom I imparted the knowledge I had acquired, have induced the belief that I might serve the public by a publication of what I know on the subject. Should I succeed in finding a Publisher, I shall be happy to send you a copy.

Evidently botanists have always done their bit in the case of a food shortage.

Reconstruction days were not favorable for the publication of scientific matter. On February 5, 1866, he writes:

My "*Mycophagia Americana*" hangs fire for the present on account of the enormous cost of publication. Prof. Gray has the thing in hand, and thinks prices will fall after a while, and that I shall have to wait. I have been ready with material these four or five months.

P. S. Some five years ago you were kind enough to arrange a list of N. Carolina Lichens for me towards a complete list of the Plants of this State. The war broke out soon after, and the printing of my Reports on the Nat. Hist. of N. Car: was suspended. When it will be resumed I know not. In our present poverty, and with our enormous taxes, I doubt if our present Legislature will give any attention to so insignificant a matter, though I have addressed the Governor on the subject. If it is ever printed, and I mean that it shall be, you shall have a copy of course.

Imagine the feelings of the Governor of North Carolina during the first days of reconstruction being urged to publish a list of plants! The matter is referred to the state legislature which takes the action on this matter of publication that might be expected and a few weeks later Curtis reports:⁴

Since my last, I have recd. a communication from a Committee of our Legislature, proposing that I should publish my Catalogue of N. C. Plants, and a new edition of the "*Woody Plants of N. C.*" on my own account. Our poverty and heavy taxes make the Legislature very chary about burdening the State with even the small amount of such publications. I prefer that the State should do the work; but if it will not, I believe I will run the risk of some loss upon the Catalogue which I am very anxious to have in print.

⁴ Letter dated Feb. 22/66.

It is pleasant to be able to record that this list of plants was finally published by the state (1867).

Ravenel's letters from 1866 until the correspondence closes are a record of struggle against the dangers and difficulties of the reconstruction period, the unaccustomed task of earning a living for his family, and most depressing of all a struggle against ill health. On November 8, 1865, he writes:

With respect to my collections nothing but a sense of necessity would induce me to part with them. I have half relented already in my intentions of selling, and hope the necessity may not arise. We suffered much during the war from privations of all kinds, and especially towards its close—but we endured these hardships, cheerfully hoping for honorable peace to come in time. At its close we found ourselves suddenly brought to poverty,—and our hopes destroyed by its termination so different from what was expected—Still our people were satisfied to accept the issue, and in good faith to abide by the decision against us. We took the oath of allegiance and were prepared to do our duty and fulfill all our obligations as good citizens. It was during the two or three months succeeding the surrender of our army, that the southern people were compelled to pass through the most trying ordeal and to drink the bitter cup of humiliation to its dregs. The military leaders offered us terms which were honorable and which were accepted in good faith. We were prepared to renew our allegiance, and accept the terms which had been offered with the best intentions of forgetting the past and healing old animosities. The terms were repudiated by the civil authorities and we were subjected to military government of the most odious kind. Troops of black savages with arms in their hands were quartered in every town and village, to maltreat and insult us, and to stir up the slaves to revolt and insurrection. Wherever these black troops were sent, they created disaffection among the negroes, and incited them to leave their homes—thus causing vagabondism, idleness, and mischief. They had not been here 12 hours before they had a riot at one of our churches on the Sabbath during prayer hours, the day after that they entered a widow lady's house to insult and abuse her, and on her son's going to headquarters to report the fact, he was knocked down and nearly murdered in hearing of their officers. Ladies were abused and cursed in the streets, and no redress (sufficient to stop such conduct) could be obtained. There was real danger for a while of the negroes being stirred up to acts of bloodshed and murder. These and other atrocities we were compelled to bear without the means of redress and apparently without hope of amelioration. It was then that I wished to leave the country and go anywhere, where law and order prevailed. I am glad to say that a much better state of things now prevails. The military authorities have removed the black troops, and the negroes are quiet and orderly.

And again in March, 1866, he exclaims:

We are charged with disloyal feelings and with a desire to oppress the freedmen unless restrained. There is positively no truth in either of these charges. Our people have with most wonderful unanimity, accepted the issues of the war as final and irreversible. They struggled manfully for four years and put forth their entire strength and resources in the fight,

because they conscientiously believed they were battling in the cause of Civil Liberty for a great principle, the right of Self Government. The fortunes of war have been decided against them. They failed after all their efforts for independence, and now as a law-abiding people who have been trained in the school of constitutional government, they are willing to abide by the issue in good faith and give their allegiance to the govt which protects them and under which they are to live. I am sure that 99 per cent of our people hold these views. That there still continues to exist in some quarters, ill feelings toward the Govt.—that the sense of injuries and of suffering should still linger in some breasts—that is only what we might expect. It would be miraculous, were it otherwise, so long as human nature remains as it is. But with the great mass of the people, these feelings do not exist—and their existence in the few can do no harm. They will gradually disappear under the healing influence of time. A great nation victorious and triumphant everywhere, without a solitary foe to dispute her power, may well exercise clemency in dealing with the harmless vagaries of a few discontented spirits.

Yet such is his friendship for Tuckerman that he is able to write in the same letter:

Your last letter received some time ago, gave me much pleasure. I have not replied sooner simply because there was nothing especially to call for a reply except to tell you how highly I appreciate the kind feelings evinced towards me personally—and the very liberal and Christian spirit in which you regard the late national chastisements.

During 1867 there are no letters, but on January 12, 1868, he “interrupts the silence” with “A New Year’s Greeting” and adds:

I would like to hear once more from you. Your letters are always welcome, instructive and interesting. They remind me of the times when I was more engaged in botany than I am now, or can ever hope to be again. I have now at least the satisfaction of these pleasant reminiscences, and the hope that my labors may have contributed somewhat to botanical science. What have you accomplished in the year passed? And what progress is made in your work on *N. Am. Lichens*. I suppose your *Exsiccata* is not yet out or I should have heard from you.

Please give me a line and tell me of your labors. I am still interested in botany though I can very little afford any time for its pursuit. It is now a struggle for subsistence.

During the next month he refers more at length to his poverty and that of his section. (Letter dated Feb. 21st, 1868.)

You say “you trust I am not weaned from botany.” I still linger on the outskirts (as it were)—but am compelled from necessity to do whatever comes to my hand, to get my daily bread. I suppose you can form but a faint idea of the universal destitution prevailing throughout the Southern States. All are in poverty. . . . No capital will venture here while this state of things continues—and there is nothing left to our own people to begin the work of rebuilding their broken fortunes. . . . I feel like a shipwrecked mariner who has been cast upon a desert coast, and forced

to subsist on whatever may be washed ashore and on the crude sustenance to be found at hand. . . . I once had a sufficiency to follow my inclinations, and *avoid* the tracks of trade. . . . I get a comfortable living (by using great economy) in selling vegetables from my garden and doing a little wood cutting for the railroad, disposing of such books as I can best spare and occasionally selling one of my botanical collections (those collected for the purpose of sale.) I have not touched my herbarium and intend to hold on to that. . . . Do not understand me as murmuring, or complaining of my lot. It is only that of thousands of others. Indeed I have daily cause of thankfulness to a kind Providence which has so signally blessed me. With my large family (10 in number) to provide for, I cannot avoid at times feeling anxiety. . . . Excuse me for dwelling too much upon matters which are painful to hear of. They occupy so much of my thoughts that they find expression but too readily. I always train myself to look at the cheerful side,—and am still in hopes that the dark clouds that overhang us, will soon pass away. At any rate, we *know* that the sun still shines beyond, and that in good time its genial rays will enliven and bless our land.

Scattered letters through 1869 mention a continued interest and, so far as circumstances permitted, activity in the botanical field. During the early months of 1870 he seems to have rendered Tuckerman considerable assistance by sending specimens of southern lichens, but under what difficulties is shown by two letters written during March.⁵

I have been occupying myself lately in making up sets of Lichens which I shall dispose of. I am under the necessity of doing this or else abandoning Botany altogether and seeking some other occupation that will give me a living.

You must excuse me if I send you the same things over under different names,—and some of which ought to be familiar to me. I have scarcely opened my Vol. of Lichens in the last 12 or 15 years,—and this last sad decade has mostly driven my thoughts from botany. And moreover I have parted with my microscope, and though I have the use of it whenever I want, I find the powers are not high enough for a satisfactory examination—(the smaller lens being *worn out*) and there are so many of the new species not yet described that I am often perplexed how to decide. . . . In making up my sets for sale, I think two good objects may be accomplished—one to furnish me with a little addition to my scanty means—and the other to enable those who are interested in the study to obtain our Southern Lichens.

Throughout the difficult years following the war, his love of botanical study and his friendship for Tuckerman seems to have remained among Ravenel's chief pleasures. His last important letter to Tuckerman (written May 3, 1870) concludes with the following paragraph:

My chief converse and entertainment is with my correspondents, who like yourself and one or two others, have been rambling the same pathway

⁵ Letters dated March 2 and March 22, 1870.

of life for now a quarter of a century. To me, the reminiscences of these earlier pursuits are exceedingly pleasant,—and a long and uninterrupted friendly intercourse, give additional strength to the bonds of a friendship established on common pursuits and sympathies. These are the things which make the retrospect of life grateful to us—and nerve us to higher aims and objects.—The asperities of political strife trouble me but little. I try to live in an atmosphere above them and to look on all these movements as the trickery of the political.

The scientists of to-day face a reconstruction period in international affairs perhaps no less trying than were those of 1865 to '70 in national affairs. It is possible that now as in '65 "the first note written beyond our lines" will come from scientists recently counted as "enemy," but who before the war were in close touch with this country. And it is to be expected that American answers will be such that correspondents will with Ravenel "appreciate the kind feelings evinced toward them personally,—and the very liberal spirit" in which we regard the late international chastisements.